

Indian Rose Annual - IRA 2009

The Making of a Heritage Rose Garden in the Centenary Park, Ooty

Girija Viraraghavan

The Centenary Rose Park in Ooty has become justly famous for the marvelous display of roses all the year round. The numbers of Visitors who throng the paths along the roses beds on the five terraces, oooh-ing and aaah-ing at the perfect beauties in all shades of colour, would gladden the hearts of all rose lovers. Hopefully, after a visit to this garden, which is a must for any tourist to this hill station, many will be persuaded to grow roses in their own homes, in gardens, terraces or just balconies.

Though the number of rose plants is staggering - 30,000 roses of about 3,000 varieties, in the five hectare garden, all are only modern roses - Hybrid Teas, Floribundas and miniatures. No doubt they are all beautiful and deserve a place in a rose garden. But equally, the beauties of by-gone years, called 'heritage roses' or OGRs (old garden roses), many of which are the progenitors of today's roses, need to be grown and appreciated. Species roses, the wild ancestors of all roses, are charming in their simple, single flowered elegance, need to be grown, too.

In order to understand the evolution of the modern rose hybrid, we need to know the background, the history of the various kinds, the classifications of the different types, one leading sequentially to the next. A garden which showcases such a history would be comprehensive and well rounded, and would be of great interest to the more knowledgeable visitor to the garden.

When we mooted the idea of entering the Centenary Park for the WFRS Garden of Excellence Award, we requested our good friend, Mrs. Helga Brichet, Past President, WFRS, and Chairperson of the WFRS Committee on Conservation, to visit Ooty, so she could assess its potential for the award. After going round the garden, and appreciating it, especially as it was in full bloom though it was a cold January morning (in 2005) she remarked to the entourage following her - mainly Horticulture Dept. Officers and the press - that she strongly recommended that an area be left apart for growing such species and heritage roses, as would do well in Ooty climate. This would be a way of preserving these roses, as many are endangered, some even gone.

Well, as we all know the Centenary Park received the Award of Garden Excellence at the World Convention in Osaka, Japan in 2006, largely due to the recommendation of Mrs. Brichet.

Since then, we have been persuading the Horticulture Dept. of the Government of Tamil Nadu that it behoved us to listen to the suggestion made by Mrs. Brichet about setting up a heritage garden within the Centenary Park. We informed the Government that we would be willing to donate all the species and old roses required for such a garden.

Finally, after many discussions, the Government approved the project, and in April 2008, the first steps for initiating the making of the garden were taken. We visited Ooty, along with Mr. G. Kasturirangan and his son, Mr. Sriram, both of KSG Sons, Bangalore. We must record our appreciation for the constant support given by them for this project. The first steps were to locate areas within the garden, which could be made into the heritage garden. We decided that it would be better to have two areas, one for species roses and one for OGRs.

After 'casing the joint' as they say criminals do, in detective stories, we zeroed in on what are called 'The Fountain Bed' and the 'Well Bed'. Actually it was Sriram who pointed out to us how appropriate these beds would be for our purpose, and once we looked at these areas with new eyes, we saw how right he was.

Both these beds are to one end of the garden, and relatively unused. The Fountain Bed, apart from a fountain, had no plants growing. It was a squarish area, with a tall cypress hedge on one side, and a curving slope on another. There were curving steps behind this slope, which led up to the Well Bed. The Well Bed area had a circular rose bed around the well, a little summer house to one end, and a beautiful grassy slope curving all along, from what we could have as the entry point arch to the heritage garden, in a wide circle right to the back of the area. Just perfect for growing ramblers.

We spent days on the site, planning the landscaping of the two gardens, and deciding on the structures required - arches for the climbing roses, pillars for standards, fences and catenaries for more climbers. We drew up detailed plans, sets of which were given to the park authorities, so they could start the digging of the beds, and order for the structures. Dr. Selvaraj, Joint Director, Horticulture, was most supportive and agreeable to all our requests (unfortunately he has since been transferred), Mr. Jagdish Kumar, Asst. Director, Horticulture, was very receptive to all our ideas, and most important, Mrs. Uma Rani, Manager of the Park, was an eager acolyte, willing to carry out all the tasks needed to have done, in order for the garden to take shape. We hope that the last two officials will continue in their posts till such time as the heritage garden is completed.

A visit in June 2008 was made (Kasturirangan and Sriram came too) to actually draw on ground the dimensions of the beds, and the placement of the structures (which still had to be ordered), Some alterations were required (as often happens when paper plans are translated to ground realities) and these were finalized.

September saw us all again in Ooty, this time bearing rich gifts of plants. All through we had been assiduously making plants of all the species and heritage roses we have growing in our own garden, and we had also sent budwood to Kasturirangan for him to make more plants. So he from Bangalore and we from Kodaikanal converged on Ooty, in vehicles laden with roses. Ours looked like a forest, as we had to pack a very large *Rosa gigantea* in twists into the boot, apart from *R. clinophylla*, *R. bracteata*, *R. laevigata* and others.

We have made lists of the different classes - Teas, Chinas, Hybrid Perpetuals, early Hybrid Teas, ramblers, Bourbons etc.

Mrs. Uma Rani had prepared the Fountain Bed garden, with the two triangular beds and the circular bed round the fountain itself, which we had envisaged, so we planted all the species we had taken. We also planted the species in places where the fences need to come up.

In one triangle bed we planted the species, *cooperii*, *rugosa*, *sempervirens prostrata*, *laevigata*, *roxburghii normalis*, and a form of *multiflora*.

In the second triangle bed were planted *indica odorata*, *multiflora watsoniana*, *clinophylla*, *banksia lutea*, *wichurana* and *roxburghii plena*.

Where a fence in front of the cypress hedge is to be kept (we kept a safe distance from the hedge, to, hopefully, prevent roots from encroaching) we planted *R. brunonii* at one end and *R. longicuspis* at the other.

On the opposite slope, near the steps leading upwards to the Well Bed, we planted three plants of *R. gigantea*, to be trained on the slope when they get bigger.

In the Well Bed, where we had wanted a long bed from the Entry Arch to the curving steps leading down to the Fountain Bed, digging showed up nothing but big boulders. These had all to be removed and soil replaced. Apparently the earlier intention for this area had been to have a parking area, so the boulders had been rammed in, prior to concreting. That idea seems to have been abandoned, but as nothing had been planted earlier to our arriving on the scene, the boulders continued. We found more boulders in the areas we marked for pits for the arches and climbing roses. Here too, the stones had to be removed, and the climbers planted, though the arches had still to be placed in position. Actually, we were in a dilemma - wait for the arches to be positioned (which could take all of many

months, since the order for the structures were still only being contemplated upon) or plant the roses and let them grow, and hope that when the arches are kept, care would be taken that no cement would fall upon the plants. Mrs. Uma Rani assured us that she would take abundant caution and care when the structures were being erected, so we decided to plant all the climbers we had taken.

October and November being heavy monsoon rain months, not much progress was possible. All the old, earlier planted roses in the large circular bed around the well in the Well Bed have been removed and planted elsewhere. This is because the soil would have become 'rose sick' and needed to be amended/changed.

We have requested the authorities to have, apart from rose name boards, big boards with explanatory texts erected in each area.

Once the budded plants have grown sufficiently, in our garden and in Kasturirangan's farm near Bangalore, they will be taken and according to the landscape plan, planted down in the appropriate beds. This process will be long drawn out, as these old beauties, being rare, have to be coddled with special care. We feel that it will take about 2 years for the entire heritage garden project to be completed. But this is a labour of love for us, and we hope that when finished, it will be a good learning tool for aspiring rose researchers and breeders, apart from the general rose grower.

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